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1979 Iran Hostage Crisis*

Behind the Veil

An American Woman's Memoir
of the 1979 Iran Hostage Crisis



Debra Johanyak



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Cover photo by Jamie Newhall.

This book is dedicated to

*El Shaddai,
Almighty God,*

and

Jason and Mathew Kamalie

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Preface

This book is a testament to the Iranian people who supported me during important phases of my personal development. It also tells the story of two nations in conflict over a series of political events involving rulers like Shah Reza Pahlavi and the Ayatollah Khomeini as well as the nameless masses that included me, a woman with dual citizenship, suspended between two feuding governments. Like divorced parents with shared custody, the United States and Iran nurtured our family in differing yet complementary ways. It is unfortunate that they remain estranged more than a quarter century after the 1979 diplomatic break.

Both nations boast illustrious histories, and both wield global influence. The United States has long been recognized for helping economically-disadvantaged countries and promoting peacekeeping efforts in war-torn regions. Iran offers an exotic culture and boundless hospitality. My birth links me to the first country, and marriage, to the second. While I enjoyed a comfortable upbringing in the United States, I experienced personal and professional growth in Iran.

No government is perfect. Many criticize several U.S. presidents for overstepping sensitive boundaries to defend weaker nations, leaving an imperialist legacy that discourages trust. Iran's Islamic Republic has been denounced for imposing fundamentalist Muslim rule on its people. Both governments appear to want what is best for their respective nations, and yet, complex problems defy simple solutions.

Grateful for freedoms enjoyed by U.S. citizens, I question some of our foreign policies. Appreciative of Iran's tolerance of an "in-law" by marriage, I felt pressured to conform to rules I did not endorse.

In this book, I have tried to recreate memories, conversations, and anecdotes from that intense time. Sometimes I have guessed at phrasing or details when I could not be sure of dialogue. Letters, periodicals, and my personal journal were sources for many statements. In certain

cases, names and descriptions have been altered to protect privacy, while some figures represent multidimensional composites. Key players are drawn from life. Any errors are unintentional, as truth remains an important means of healing the past and building the future.

Much remains to be done toward renewing relations between the United States and Iran. Both governments must set aside the veil of pretense to face past indiscretions and embrace future goals. I hope this book contributes toward those efforts.

Acknowledgments

Steeped in classical legends and Islamic mysticism, Iran became a modern enigma following the militants' capture of sixty-six hostages at the American Embassy in Tehran on November 4, 1979. Many Americans, Iranians, and other nationalities played the roles that produced the hostage drama and corresponding events that unfolded in my life. This book is an attempt both to present a personal account of the international crisis from the perspective of a dual American-Iranian identity, and to recount the repercussions I experienced as an American living in Iran during that period. The clash of cultures that shook the world echoed through the lives of many individuals, including those of my family. It was a fateful time to be an American in a country that had in effect declared war against my homeland.

While I am not a historical scholar, and this book cannot be considered a pristine record, I have attempted to describe meaningful experiences as an American woman married to an Iranian national to share with readers interested in the 1979 hostage crisis. I would like to thank those who found the story worthy of print and donated valuable time to reading it and offering helpful feedback, including Elton Glaser, interim director of the University of Akron Press, and the thoughtful reviewers of my manuscript. Amy Freels, production coordinator, Jena Lohrbach, graduate assistant, and Julie Gammon, marketing manager, contributed valuable expertise as well. Dr. Ali Akbar Mahdi of Ohio Wesleyan University provided insightful feedback and assistance. There is not enough space to thank everyone whose comments and questions helped shape the book's development. Some may recognize themselves in these pages.

Special appreciation is given to my former sister-in-law, Parvin "Pari" Kamalie and her sisters, especially Esmat and Tooran (with daughter Mithra), whose friendship and generosity are beyond compare. Abdollah and Mina shared their home and their hearts with us.

I want to thank Nas for introducing me to Iran. Mamanbozorg and Bababozorg, having departed this earth, are remembered with affection. I appreciate the opportunity of teaching and studying at Shiraz University, where I received a graduate assistantship, and the many students and colleagues who made that experience meaningful.

I am grateful to my sister Becky for letters and phone calls during that trying time. My mother, father, and Annie are now gone, but their letters witness our closeness during those days. My brothers, John and Scott, supported my departure for Iran, and cheered our return.

The fifty-three hostages who spent 444 days in captivity deserve recognition for their service to the United States, which in turn should be commended for a general if not universal show of restraint during the hostage crisis. I thank the government of Iran for allowing me to remain in that country following the break in diplomatic relations with the United States. I am especially thankful to the Iranian people for their unparalleled kindness and acceptance.

I thank God for protecting the hostages, my children, and me. I cannot imagine He is pleased when His children hate and hurt each other. We should rather rise above the past to share our strengths and overcome weaknesses.

INTRODUCTION

Of Kings and Conflicts



IRAN'S MIDDLE EASTERN HISTORY, ISLAMIC GOVERNMENT, AND rich oil supply claim a place of note in contemporary news media as well as in political, social, and religious studies. Of ongoing concern to Americans is the fact that for twenty-seven years Iran and the United States have remained diplomatically estranged as a result of the 1979 hostage crisis. While mutual distrust continues over oil supplies and nuclear capabilities, it is time to put hostilities aside and begin building a new relationship based on mutual respect.

Diplomatic relations between Iran and the United States, which had been growing unstable for some time, shattered on November 4, 1979, when Iranian militants broke into the U.S. Embassy in the capital city of Tehran and captured dozens of staff secretaries, administrators, and marines. Supported in principle by Supreme Ruler Ayatollah Khomeini, militants demanded concessions from the American government in exchange for the hostages' release, including the return of cancer-stricken former monarch Mohammad Reza Pahlavi for trial, and a formal apology from the United States for interfering with Iranian affairs. The United States refused all demands, and despite worldwide

negotiations and a failed rescue attempt, fifty-three hostages remained captive for 444 days. They were released on the day that President Ronald Reagan, Jimmy Carter's successor, was sworn into office, but diplomatic ties between the two countries remain severed as of this writing.

In recent years, hints have surfaced that both countries might be willing to rebuild a productive relationship. But neither government has found a way to initiate negotiations. Despite President George W. Bush's labeling of Iran, along with Iraq and North Korea, as an "axis of evil" in January 2004, U.S. government representatives made overtures to send a diplomatic team that would include Senator Elizabeth Dole, former president of the American Red Cross, to discuss Iran's nuclear program, human rights, and terrorist role in the global arena. Iran's foreign minister Kamal Kharrazi responded by saying the proposal appeared "lopsided," lacking serious intent to resolve long-standing differences,¹ and Iran rejected the visitation bid. Both governments remain wary.

There is still much that we do not understand about this Middle Eastern country, with its variegated culture and diverse people. Although Jews and Christians seem to expect others to know and respect the Ten Commandments, how many westerners understand the five pillars of Islam? Why are we hard pressed to explore differing definitions of values, like honor and modesty? Why can a European nation like France strip schoolgirls of their traditional headgear and yet Iran be criticized for insisting that women cover themselves? If East and West can set aside disagreements to focus on shared goals, a strategic partnership might form to create a united front against destructive forces like terrorism and prejudice.

As a citizen of both countries in 1979, I witnessed Iranian and American responses to the hostage crisis and found myself at times caught within intercultural hostilities. Though I had avoided political involvement and religious commitment while coming of age in the United States, critical issues stemming from these belief systems in Iran demanded a public response or personal compliance. My first national voting experience occurred in Iran's 1980 presidential election. The hope of making a positive impact on government leadership during a critical time of national unrest and international crisis stoked my involve-

ment in political events and influenced me to become a registered voter after my return to the United States. In parallel fashion, though I had attended church sporadically before moving to Iran, it was in that Islamic nation that I confronted and confirmed my Christian beliefs while reflecting on Muslim doctrines.

This book highlights my observations as an American married to an Iranian in the 1970s while students at a midwestern university. We later lived in Iran under two regimes. In 1977, after earning bachelor's degrees, my husband Nasrolah and I, with two young sons, moved to Iran to build our future. At that time, the country was under the reign of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, who would be Iran's last monarch. After several months, a medical emergency requiring surgery and convalescence led to my departure. I left Iran with mixed feelings, sad to leave the friends I had made, yet relieved to return to familiar surroundings. My husband later followed us to the States, and for a time we worked at establishing a life in this country.

But, in 1979, we decided to return to Iran after the Ayatollah Khomeini had come to power. Neither my husband nor I was much interested in politics. We assumed Iran's governmental transition would be smooth, and we expected to live life largely on our terms without government interference. But in the fall of 1979, the political situation whirled out of control when anti-American fervor swept the country and climaxed in the embassy takeover. Our family remained in Iran through the spring of 1980, determined to give our relocation every chance, and hoping to ride out the storm. But tremors far more violent and far-reaching than any earthquake forced our eventual evacuation.

My husband's family was affectionate and considerate; I am still very fond of them. The university students were among the best I have taught, having instructed students from around the globe in English as a Second Language. Iran's mountains, rivers, and waterfalls were as welcoming as its tribal, intellectual, and rural people. Iranian hospitality is matched only by Islamic faith. Both of these strong, pervasive forces embrace strangers in all-encompassing terms.

"Stay and dine with us," a housewife pleads, following centuries of tradition.

"Conform or die!" extremists warn, echoing terrorists of contemporary times.

Most Iranians revealed themselves as loving, gracious, loyal people who desire to live peacefully with each other and in harmony with global neighbors. Like all of us, they want to be treated with the same kindness and respect they extend to others. Yet, every country, race, and belief system has its share of fanatics. I came face to face, literally, with those who were determined to rid Iran of Western influence—including me. Fortunately, those encounters were rare. I later learned that Iranians studying, working, or living in the United States experienced similar confrontations.

Coming of age with a feminist perspective and marrying a man from the Middle East set the stage for inherent conflicts. But the tensions that soon beset me were very different from those I might have expected. While the story of a Christian married to a Muslim against the backdrop of their feuding nations suggests a modern Romeo and Juliet theme, the drama we enacted climaxed in a cataclysmic collision of culture and politics with far-reaching implications.

This book offers a brief overview of Iran's history. Included is the background of its two most recent governments, the Pahlavi monarchy and the Islamic Republic, and their clash that shook the world. My narrative weaves together three themes that intersect at the historic 1979 crossroads—the role of the U.S. government in Iran, Islamic leaders in conflict with the United States and each other, and representative people of both nations. Chapters describe my marriage and family life; the moves to Iran in 1977 and 1979 that include personal struggles such as a sandstorm, house rats, and verbal assault; and a campus takeover that threatened our freedom and perhaps my life. Overarching these events was the day-to-day breaking news of the hostage crisis. It was a time I will never forget.

The chief symbol of my private and political dilemma was the veil, or chador. Resisting urgings and threats to cover myself in public during that chaotic epoch of 1979–80 grew out of a resolve to maintain my personal identity. After November 4, 1979, the veil came to embody increasing pressure to conform to Islamic principles. I felt that wearing the chador would be to capitulate to government control. Not wearing it, on the other hand, exposed me to criticism and danger. I was destined to confront new meanings to being American, female, and Christian that were very different from those I had grown up with in the Midwest.

Some of my interpersonal conflict grew out of youthful naiveté. At twenty-four, fresh from college, I expected the world to accept me “as is.” What I had learned in college about democracy and feminism I assumed would be embraced everywhere. Though I did not expect Iranian women to hold feminist views, I somewhat smugly assumed that all who knew of my American heritage would respect it and allow me to follow my beliefs. If they did not know I was American, surely my public appearance without a veil would be telling—and it was, but not in the way I expected.

What I failed to understand was that presuming upon the right to follow my own path might distract those who walked a different road. While I meant no harm in avoiding the veil in my quest for physical, spiritual, and political freedom, my refusal to adopt protective covering could be interpreted as spitting in the eye of my host country. Generally familiar with Islamic teachings, I did not grasp the full symbolic and practical meanings of the chador. Thus, appearing in public “exposed” to the new Islamic regime, I might as well have thumbed my nose at any passing ayatollah. Simplicity could be readily construed as arrogance, especially since my dark features suggested a possible Iranian lineage that would make me beholden to Islamic mandates. I should have better respected the spiritual views of the people I lived with instead of expecting them to accept me on Western terms.

Like the captives, the world was taken by surprise when dozens of American Embassy staff were captured in Tehran on November 4, 1979. Yet the takeover should not have been unexpected. In fact, there had been ample warnings of anti-American violence for some time. Long-term conditions leading to the crisis can be traced through the first three-quarters of the twentieth century. But to understand the background of Iran’s modern conflicts, it is helpful to look at earlier history.

Despite living in Iran for several months before the embassy takeover, I knew little about the country’s political background, and had no hint of impending events that would drastically affect our lives. Oh, there had been rumors and rumblings, but we had grown accustomed to the fundamentalist lifestyle that was implemented when Ayatollah Khomeini returned to Iran. We heard the random news stories about anti-Western demonstrations on the television. My mother, aunt, and sister wrote letters expressing concern and begging me to come home.

But having known many Iranians in the States, and living among such welcoming folk in the Persia I was learning to love, there seemed to be no real reason for alarm. Nas and I were complacent; his family members were reassuring. Only later would I discover how far many people go to convince others and themselves to believe that all would be well, a survival strategy they had practiced for centuries when faced with imminent danger.

On the night before the embassy assault, alone in my bed in the flat above the one shared by Mina and Abdollah, I slept dreamlessly, little suspecting the shocking news that would greet me in the morning. Before that, however, many cumulative events would fall into place and bring me to the historic 1979 crossroads.